

Durruti was a revolutionary unionist (and don't you forget it!)



A response by Juan Conatz to a blog that criticizes the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

Recently, I came across something that mentioned an article I wrote for the *Industrial Worker* back in April 2012 titled '[Some objections to Occupy May 1st](#)'. At the time, I was deeply involved in Occupy Minnesota's May 1st committee, and wanted to push back on some stuff coming from other radicals and lefties in the labor movement. Looking back, I mostly still agree with what I wrote, although with some regret of possibly contributing to the redefinition of 'strike' that has allowed some of the Fight For 15 'actions' to be passed off as 'strikes'....but that's a different conversation.

Anyway, my article's mentioning was part of a larger '[Criticism of the Industrial Workers of the World](#)' made from someone who seemingly was a part of the [Autonomy Alliance](#), a [synthesis anarchist](#) group based in St. Louis (although I'm told it is now dissolved).

The perspective is mostly familiar. The author disagrees with revolutionary unionism in favor of participating in the AFL-CIO unions. Ironically named after one of the most well-known revolutionary unionists in history, [Buenaventura Durruti](#), the blog offers a confused mixture

of politics in its critiques of the IWW, but can be boiled down to being against anarcho-syndicalism or the revolutionary unionism of the IWW.

"Business unionism"

The blog's critiques are mainly concerned with [iww.org's treatment of the AFL-CIO](#), or in the IWW's words, 'business unionism'. I do agree that sometimes Wobblies say things about the reformist unions (my preferred term because it feels less scathing) that are just not true. I've heard it repeated, many times, about dues money going directly to political parties such as the Democrats. This is actually illegal. Almost all unions have a separate and voluntary (but strongly encouraged) fund for political contributions. I also think the contrasting of union democracy between the IWW and other unions isn't always correct.

But it is mostly correct. It doesn't take much to find recent examples of forced trusteeship on militant locals, exhausting membership with repeated votes on contracts that were rejected, international-level officers that are not elected by the general membership, the uphill battle for rank-and-file candidates and agenda to get anywhere nationally and much more. And at the heart of the mistaken claim about dues money is some truth: the reformist unions spend a ton of money and resources on political campaigns and politicians. To the point that this has been destructive and counterproductive. This is why we've seen significant talk from a minority of people in the labor movement about [returning to the disruptive strikes of the 1930s-1940s](#) and others who plead for the labor movement to recognize that the State-Labor-Capital agreement established during The Great Depression and after World War II has been shattered for over 30 years now.

One of the things about the IWW that irks the author is our refusal to endorse or run candidates or seemingly to engage in political campaigns. They say:

Political campaigns are thrown to the wayside in the IWW. While non-electoral political campaigns are not even alluded to, I see no evidence of one ever existing in the IWW.

What were the Free Speech Fights, if not political? What about the unemployed organizing in the 1930s? Our antiwar stance? Our fight against austerity in Wisconsin? Does [destroying a proposed local anti-homeless ordinance](#) count? Those were all political fights that we engaged in. Despite some of the outdated rhetoric rooted in the non-electoral or anti-electoralism of the historical IWW, we do indeed, engage in political fights.

The bargaining unit is sacred!

Another issue with the IWW that the author has is some of our stances when it came to the West Coast port actions during the Occupy movement back in 2012. If you don't remember these, this was when Occupy threw mass pickets at several ports. Because, usually, the ILWU does not cross picket lines, using a health and safety clause to accomplish this, these pickets essentially choked the ports of workers for certain amounts of time. Anyway, the author of the blog particularly dislikes [an article written by a IWW member from Nebraska](#). Claiming that being in favor of these actions without official endorsement or agreement of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) was a violation of the principle of self-management, the author unfortunately engages in some of what he accuses the IWW of doing: not seeing reformist unions as complex organizations with a diversity of structures and opinions within them.

It would have been disastrously illegal for the ILWU, within the confines of contractualism, to engage in any sort of officially sanctioned work stoppage or strike in solidarity with Occupy. Within the ILWU, there was division on how to even relate to Occupy. While there was loud talk against the blockades, there was also action in support, such as when a Local 10 member "[appealed to longshore workers to stand in solidarity with the Occupy protesters](#)" at the dispatch at the docks in San Francisco. There were some, particularly radical rank-and-file or older retired members, who were fully in support. And there were others, who were hostile. This became most obvious in Seattle, where [ILWUers who were anti-Occupy disrupted an Occupy event](#) which had pro-port blockade ILWU members speaking at it.

The author's insistence for seemingly official, majoritarian approval in the name of 'self-management' also completely ignores the history of the ILWU, which has long had minority leftist rank-and-file coordination on port shutdowns with outside groups when it comes to social movements, which over the years has included the anti-apartheid and immigration rights movements. This presence of leftists, always a minority, although at times in leadership, has been tolerated, respected and defended, even during the darkest days of the Cold War and its subsequent red-baiting¹. A call for official, majoritarian approval is a call for marginalization of the existing left-wing in the ILWU, which is something that would actually run contrary to the author's advocated efforts of radicals involving themselves in the reformist unions rather than joining smaller, revolutionary ones.

An appeal for the old ways

The author, somewhat surprisingly to me, describes the AFL-CIO created 'We Are One' groups positively, saying:

Still, with all of the trash the IWW talks on the AFL-CIO, it's worth noting that the AFL-CIO declared the "We Are One" campaign over a year prior to Occupy, in which they held rallies at local union halls throughout the country, rallying workers to understand that the federal and state governments were waging a war on the working class as a whole. This campaign argued that all workers, including the unemployed, were "One"; it was accompanied by campaigns to organize the unemployed. I witnessed some of the most bureaucratic careerist labor leaders have to give public speeches, declaring that their event was for "the entire working class, not just union workers". Oddly enough, this is solidarity unionism.

We Are One, I believe, was created during the various attacks on public sector collective bargaining in 2011 that were happening in places like Wisconsin, Michigan, Iowa and elsewhere. It did make some rhetorical attempts at changing the narrative to 'bill against public sector workers' to 'a bill against all of us' (us meaning 'working class' or 'middle class' depending on who was talking). But my experience in Wisconsin during this time left me with a far from positive view of this attempt.

Rather than expand the fight and narrative to all of the attacks on the class that were happening, it was more interested in mobilizing people in defense of public sector unions right to collectively bargain, all in the name of *this is just how it has been*. This was so much of an issue that many liberals and progressives, far from being 'dual-unionists' or even radicals at all, formed or participated in other, equivalent mobilization groups. We Are Wisconsin's attempts to engage in membership or community outreach amounted to hosting meetings of almost all union or non-profit staff during working hours on a weekday. I was at one of these stage-managed affairs, which was interrupted by IWWs, immigration and

women's rights activists, who insisted on asking questions about the narrow public-sector bargaining framing, as well as solely doing outreach to staffers and the time of day of the meeting. Most of the dual-carders considered this We Are One group a joke, and even some of the flown in staffers for unions who publicly came out against all the austerity measures, did not speak kindly of them.

The author's claims about what the IWW does starts to get a bit more distant from reality further in the critique. Either accidentally or purposefully ignorant of the massive conflict between SEIU and UNITE HERE, SEIU's raiding of the Puerto Rican Teachers Federation while the latter was facing an offensive from the state, or the Operating Engineers raiding and scabbing on ILWU in Longview, to name just a few, they claim:

[...]it's worth noting that for as small as the IWW is, they get into more conflicts with other workers' organizations than most "business unions" in the US.

As evidence of this mighty claim, the author names a single nonpublic campaign in Madison, Wisconsin in which Communication Workers of America was brought in by a socialist who worked there and was hostile to the IWW. In response, Wobblies wrote an article about it for the *Industrial Worker*, met with the CWA to try to get them to respect their campaign, and finally, let it be known that they would continue organizing, regardless of what CWA decided to do. Apparently, this is on the same scale of conflict as trying to take advantage of the State decertifying a striking union, as in the case of SEIU in Puerto Rico, or crossing a picket line, like the Operating Engineers in Longview.

When it comes down to it, the IWW is relentlessly critical of the reformist unions and their tactics and worldview, but always stands in solidarity with them on the picket line or against bosses and the State's efforts to defeat them. More recently, IWW members have partially run, been arrested at or even suffered life threatening injuries at *other union's pickets*. The author seems to think solidarity means giving unqualified, verbal support to everything reformist unions do, rather than giving physical support to workers in struggle.

There's quite a bit more that the author says, but what I've mentioned is what caught my attention and triggered some amount of interest. Overall, I think they are as naive about unionism in general as some of the IWW caricatures they set-up to tear down and the conclusions they reach are unconvincing.

Originally posted: May 19, 2015 at [thinkin through it](#)

- [1](#). Kimeldorf, Howard. *Reds or rackets: the making of radical and conservative unions on the waterfront*. University of California Press, 1992, page 4-6